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ABSTRACT

A long term leadership development project for Jefferson Parish, Louisiana principals is outlined in this paper. The project model emphasized peer networking as a primary process component for developing instructional leadership of principals. In the first year, three activities were implemented: (1) concerns-based meetings; (2) a workshop series; and (3) the institution of a Principals' Planning Committee (PPC). In the meetings, small groups of about 8 principals, drawn randomly from the pool of 84 principals, shared their concerns. The workshops were scheduled to combine principals' concerns with the "Effective Schools" agenda. The PPC developed the Peer Team Project. All principals were organized into peer teams of seven members each and assigned to visit each member's school during the year. The Peer Teams were then organized into Cluster Groups, composed of three teams each, required to meet on a scheduled basis during the year to address issues of common concern. In response to third year activities, the PPC devised a general reorganization of the project along lines of high school feeder schools that has led to the creation of new entities and activities, focused on communities. The proper focus of leadership development programs may lie in addressing the human needs associated with the role rather than instructional needs. (MLF)

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JEFFERSON PARISH PRINCIPALS' INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP PROJECT, 1984-87

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In 1984 the Jefferson Parish Public School District, Louisiana, initiated a long term leadership development project for its principals. The project was premised on the notion that the principals themselves should have a major role in defining, developing and implementing such a project. This paper outlines the history of the project and the nature of the model developed, a model emphasizing peer networking as a primary process component for developing instructional leadership of principals.

Background

Jefferson Parish (county) is adjacent to New Orleans and contains 84 schools, ranging from small rural schools to large urban high schools. The parish encompasses a large geographical area, extending from the East Bank of the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. The district serves urban, suburban and rural populations with significant numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Parish-wide student scores on standard achievement tests are below state norms, although individual schools excel. The parish contains diverse ethnic minorities (primarily black and Vietnamese) and operates under court-ordered desegregation rules. The district has struggled in recent years with problems of low educational achievement, declining resources due to the decline of the oil industry, a regressive state and

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local tax system and citizen attitudes often hostile to public education. Jefferson parish is characterized by fragmented political authority, rooted strongly in the Louisiana populist tradition. Education in Jefferson Parish, as in Louisiana, generally, is often a source of patronage and power for local politicians.

With such factors in the background, the parish school board decided to embark on a major instructional leadership inservice project for principals directed toward many of the goals of the Effective Schools movement. Although committed to implementing a project designed to improve instructional leadership, central office administrators had very general goals and few specific ideas regarding the best way to do such a thing. There was, however, a general feeling that principals had become the "forgotten people" in school reform and it was time to resurrect the role of principal by assisting them in improving their leadership within the system. I was asked to serve as consultant to the parish for this effort.

Project origins

Although far from clear with regard to what "instructional leadership" meant or should mean, we directed our effort largely within the context of emerging Effective Schools literature. We also were attracted to efforts to describe organizational and leadership effectiveness in the private sector, such as that represented by Peters and Waterman in their book In Search of Excellence (1982). In sum, we concluded that an approach most likely to succeed over a period of time would be one in which principals would be active participants in determining the character their own program. From the beginning we adhered to the

following guiding principles:

1. Many principals had already heard a good deal about instructional leadership, particularly as developed by Effective Schools advocates. Except in summary form, it should not be necessary to retread most of this territory.

2. Information-giving should not be a primary feature of the project, nor should workshops, which were perceived to be essentially short-term treatments.

3. For long-term impact, the project should mesh the effective schools agenda with concerns the principals have about their "real worlds."

4. A substantial portion of the project should be premised on the notion that instructional leadership has always been part of the principal's job and that our task must be to provide concrete support for principals in carrying out this aspect of their work.

In the first year, three activities were implemented; concerns-based meetings, a workshop series and the institution of a Principals' Planning Committee (PPC).

The first stage, a series of small-group, concerns-based meetings, were arranged. In these meetings, small groups of about 8 principals, drawn randomly from the pool of 84 principals, were called together and simply asked to share their concerns in two hour, open-agenda meetings. Ground rules included no evaluation on our part regarding what they say and that these concerns would comprise the building blocks for future work in the project. Principals were free to ventilate or "bitch" about anything they

chose. Topics ranged from the Rodney Dangerfield syndrome ("I can't get no respect.") to concerns about due process and fairness in the day-to-day operations of the school.

Although generally eschewing workshops as a central device for improving leadership, we did schedule a series of three two-hour workshops to combine principals' concerns with the "Effective Schools" agenda. We also introduced information and activities from the fields of organizational development, sociology of organizations and group dynamics. Workshops were "process" oriented, with emphasis on small group activities and discussions. Activities included writing and sharing "visions" for one's school, identifying strategies for implementing visions, discussing organizational effectiveness and personal styles, and developing "superordinate goals" (Pascal and Athos, 1982) extending beyond the "product" character of the instructional program, likely to affect attitudes and morale. A primary purpose for these workshops was to demonstrate a strong commitment to principals' "real world" concerns as they relate to aspects of leadership identified in the research literature. We avoided a strong emphasis on theory, except to indicate ways in which certain theoretical perspectives might help principals focus on daily management of their particular schools.

At the concluding workshop sessions, we asked for volunteers to form a planning committee to organize the project for the second year and beyond. Twenty-two principals attended the first meeting of the PPC. The committee met several times in spring and summer of 1985 and developed what would become known as the Peer Team Project.

The Peer Team Project

The PPC (about 20-25 individuals), held a series of meetings in the late spring and summer of 1984 and devised a structure for the continuation of the project. Throughout the life of the project the PPC has continued to make key decisions regarding project activities. Early on, the PPC devised the Peer Team Project, the centerpiece of the project.

All principals were organized into peer teams of seven members each, representing diverse grade levels and geographic regions. Teams were assigned one basic task: to visit each member's school during the year. Visits would be open-ended in character and would become the basis for mutual sharing and learning. Each team would assume responsibility for its own schedule; there would be no formal evaluation, no reporting up the administrative ladder. Only the host principal would have any responsibility for planning a visit. Classrooms might be visited; aspects of the school plant might be studied; specific administrative concerns might be discussed; the group might simply socialize. Principals were assigned to peer teams on the basis of geography, grade level representation and prior friendships. Principals were given their assignments on the first inservice day in the following academic year.

The Peer Teams were then organized into Cluster Groups, composed of three teams each. Clusters were required to meet on a scheduled basis during the year to debrief team visits and to address issues of common concern. Cluster meetings were also to be open-ended, to allow for a range of input from all partici-

pants. Such open agendas would foster the concerns-based emphasis of the program.

Additional PPC meetings were held throughout the year to monitor progress of the project. The PPC assumed responsibility for proposing inservice activities and agendas and generally articulating the interests of principals as expressed in peer team and cluster meetings. One inservice activity, introducing "Quality Circles" techniques, actually led to the implementation of specific "Quality Circles" procedures in PPC meetings. Another issue, introduced in an early inservice meeting, was the concept of high expectations, a concept central to a substantial portion of the continuing discourse in the program.

First year outcomes of the Peer Team Project can be summarized as follows:

1. About 75% of the principals were active participants in teams, about 50% in clusters.

2. All but one team (out of 12) completed its entire schedule of school visits.

3. Cluster meetings were perceived by participants as having less value than team visits, although for us, these meetings were important sources of information and monitoring of team development generally.

4. All meetings were characterized by sharing, including sharing by principals whose schools had been characterized by chronically low student achievement. By the end of the first year, two of these principals attributed the improvement of test scores to assistance provided by the teams.

5. Individuals identified as potential "blockers" by the

PPC, in most cases, were active and enthusiastic participants in all phases of the project, including the PPC.

Peer Teams and Clusters were continued into the third year but, in response to concerns expressed in Cluster meetings, the PPC decided to emphasize task agendas for clusters, most of which would center on Effective Schools findings. Peer visits would continue, but teams were encouraged to vary their tasks in terms of their particular interests. Thus, they need not visit their own schools, but could visit other team's schools or even visit schools outside of the parish. The PPC also arranged several inservice days, from "nuts and bolts," to presentations by nationally recognized consultants.

Cluster meetings, to the surprise of many participants, although to be specifically structured around tasks, including "show and tell," continued largely as before. In effect, the desired task-orientation did not meet everyone's goals for these meetings. Clusters tended to continue open-ended discussions much like those held in the first year. These cluster meetings continued to serve as forums for principals' interests and concerns.

In response to third year activities, particularly in the clusters, the PPC devised a general reorganization of the project along lines of high schools-feeder schools. Many principals seemed to feel that such a reorganization would speak more effectively to interests and needs centered on common student bodies and communities. This new organization has led to the creation of new entities and activities, focused on communities as opposed to the parish in general.

Conclusions

It remains to be seen if "instructional leadership" actually improves as a consequence of this project. Insofar as the character of the principal's role may have to do primarily with an array of human relations tasks as opposed to intensive involvement in instruction, leadership may consist primarily of such things as developing effective community relations, improving relations with staff, buffering the school from the community and central administration, fostering order and safety within the school, and encouraging high achievement expectations for students and faculty. The proper focus of leadership development programs may lie in addressing the human needs associated with the role rather than instructional needs.

Principals operate in a world of social and geographical isolation, in demanding interpersonal settings in which questions of control, order and authority persist. Principals are continually confronted with questions having to do with what can be legitimately done in given situations. A continuing thread in this program has been the question of how much authority principals have and how it can best be used. Peer teams and clusters help provide definition and direction for specific individual needs.

Leadership in schools is very much shaped by the character of the institution. Instructional leadership, as a presumed variant or subdivision of leadership generally, is a construct that perpetuates a myth about the principal without accounting for the heirarchical uniqueness of schools. Insofar as instructional goals are often amibiguous or vacuous, program development and

implementation is haphazard, and evaluation is often ceremonialized, the application of the formal aspects of instructional leadership, that is, the specifics of what is taught and how, would likely be disruptive (Meyer and Scott, 1983). This, in turn, would certainly increase the burdens of the administrator. The ability to coordinate things may lie in the ability to select priorities from among a plethora of stimuli.

Included in the principal's role is the need to buffer the school's inconsistencies from other constituencies, including the central administration, school board, community groups and, often, other principals. The bulk of effective behaviors by a principal may fall essentially into what can be called "human relations," often a collage of processes and rituals at the school site, combined with a variety of buffering strategies with respect to outside constituencies. It may be that human relations and buffering may be the significant behaviors at the heart of the effective schools agenda for principals.

In this project the continuing process of arranging and rearranging official, but quasi-formal, "networks" of principals, has tended to address aspects of school structure that flow from the "uncoupled" character of the system. The quasi-coupling embedded in this project has sharpened consensus among principals regarding priorities as school site leaders and has served to provide a support base for principals to test the waters in some of their more problematic areas, such as teacher evaluation. The fact that the program has persisted over time, changing shape to meet ongoing interests of principals, but not changing in its

essential purposes or dynamics, underlines the viability of collegial and cooperative models for the professional development of school principals.

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